Kenneth Crawford

'Our Least Understood President . . .

RICHARD NIXON is, beyond doubt, our least understood President. Although subjected to close public scrutiny for the last quarter century, he remains an enigma to his critics and interpreters, both friendly and unfriendly, and to the American people.

By the normal rules of the game, he should be riding through the ceremonies of his second inaugural borne high on the shoulders of grateful admirers.

He has just won reelection in an unprecedented sweep. He is about to achieve a cease-fire in Indochina on more favorable terms than anybody thought possible only a few weeks ago. His diplomacy has improved relations with the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China and produced a strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviets.

At the same time, he has taken command in domestic affairs with the announced purpose of pinching the federal purse hard enough to avoid a tax increase and to control inflation.

YET HE STARTS his second term more damned than praised. Congress is threatening him with all manner of retribution for what it regards as his haughty disdain of its wishes, though its fondest wish has been to put an end to the country's involvement in Vietnam. That he is doing what it most wants done fails to placate Congress. Indeed, it seems to be all the more infuriated.

Hitherto friendly columnists deplore the President's recent aloofness from the Washington scramble. Unfriendly commentators and columnists condemn him for everything he has done since the election, especially for his "murder bombing" of Hanoi and for his "heartless" spending cutbacks. Also for what he has not done to explain himself.

More than 100 members of Congress wouldn't even attend any inaugural event, some of them choosing to align themselves with demonstrators demanding the peace already negotiated. There have been curious inaugurals before but none nuttier than this.

WHAT THE COMPLAINERS and threateners fail to understand is that Mr. Nixon doesn't much care whether he is loved or unloved. He is used to being unloved. Unlike most of us, he doesn't go through life courting affection. He has the strictly professional politician's attitude: if his policies command support and votes, he can make do without love. Actually few politicians are professional enough to manage this kind of indifference.

Mr. Nixon expects nothing but abuse from ideological liberals who have reason to find fault with his conservatism. They approved of his approaches to mainland China and Russia but grudgingly and with fingers crossed. He shrugs off their criticism except when, in his opinion, it is unfair and spills over into channels of communication, flooding the mass media. Even here, his associates seem to be more sensitive than he is.

HE HARBORS no illusions about the possibility of winning over people who have never stopped resenting the roughness of his campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas or his "persecution" of Alger Hiss. Yet they seem to cling to the notion, equally illusory, that they can influence him. He is deaf to the sounds that come from what in White House circles is called "The Georgetown cocktail circuit," a shorthand description of the well-heeled liberals of intellectual pretension everywhere who are accustomed to being heard and heeded.

Even the promise of Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign — to bring us together — is now regarded in the White House as unrealistic. The most a President can hope for in this big, diverse country is support from a reliable majority and furious opposition from a minority. Mr. Nixon obviously thinks he now has that.

His confidence of vindication, or at least that of the men who surround him and presumably reflect his attitudes, has produced some acts that appear arrogant and vindictive, some inexcusably petty.

But it has also produced, or is about to produce, ceasefire terms that will give South Vietnam a chance to survive as an independent country. Mr. Nixon's order to bomb Hanoi after the peace that was "at hand" slipped out of hand was the ultimate demonstration of this re-elected President's way of doing things. He must have anticipated the outrage it would provoke at home and abroad, though perhaps not its intensity. He went ahead anyway and faced the bitter music in silence.

HE GAMBLED and won. Nixon haters will never forgive him for that.

The strange part of the reaction was that the Georgetown types and the peace demonstrators worked themselves up to a higher pitch of resentment than the Communists in Moscow, Peking or even Hanoi did. The Communists expected what they got; with the tables turned they would have done the same thing. Their reports of casualties were moderate. And last week they released, through the Japanese, film showing Hanoi, which the world had been led to believe was a shambles, going about business as usual in streets untouched by bombs.

Maybe the Communists understand Mr. Nixon better than we do.

The Washington Post

EUGENE MEYER, 1875-1959
PHILIP L. GRAHAM, 1915-1963

KATHARINE GRAHAM
Publisher

JOHN S. PRESCOTT JR., President — BENJAMIN C. BRADLEE, Executive Editor

Philip L. Geyelin, Editorial Page Editor; Howard Simons, Managing Editor; Gerald W. Siegel, Vice President; Robert P. Thome, Treasurer; Joseph P. Lynch, Vice President-Advertising; Jack F. Patterson, Circulation Director.

Published by The Washington Post Company: 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005

FREDERICK S. BEEBE, Chairman of the Board — KATHARINE GRAHAM, President